United Nations E/CN.6/2019/5

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
17 December 2018

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Sixty-third session
11–22 March 2019
Item 3 of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century"

Discussion guide for the ministerial round tables to be held under the priority theme "Social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls"

Note by the Secretariat

I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 2015/6 on the future organization and methods of work of the Commission on the Status of Women, the Economic and Social Council decided that the session of the Commission would include a ministerial segment to reaffirm and strengthen political commitment to the realization of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, as well as their human rights, and to ensure high-level engagement and the visibility of the deliberations of the Commission, and that the segment would include ministerial round tables or other high-level interactive dialogues.

2. In accordance with the multi-year programme of work of the Commission, as contained in Economic and Social Council resolution 2016/3, the Commission will consider "Social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls" as the priority theme for its sixty-third session, to be held from 11 to 22 March 2019. Further to that decision, it is proposed that the Commission hold ministerial round tables at that session to provide ministers with opportunities for high-level engagement on key issues arising under the priority theme.

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II. Organizational matters

A. Theme and topics

3. Under the priority theme "Social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls", the Commission will hold four ministerial round tables, to be held in two parallel meetings on the following topics:

(a) Good practices in the provision of social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure, including for recognizing and valuing unpaid care and domestic work;

(b) Good practices and policies for the design, and the provision and implementation of social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure, including for the promotion of women's representation in various sectors and all levels.

4. The ministerial round tables should focus on the exchange of experiences, lessons learned and good practices in relation to the proposed topics. Ministers will be encouraged to look ahead towards realizing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, as well as their human rights. Ministers will be encouraged to highlight the steps and measures that are necessary and planned in order to ensure that national responses effectively contribute to the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, and to the full, effective and accelerated implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

B. Participants

5. The round tables will provide ministers attending the sixty-third session of the Commission with the opportunity to engage in dialogue and discussion. They will be open to all Member States and observers.

6. Ministers are invited to indicate, in advance and preferably no later than 26 February 2019, the ministerial round table in which they would prefer to participate, as well as their second preference. Approximately 15 to 20 ministers are expected to participate in each round table. The Chairs of the ministerial round tables will have a list of ministers who have signed up for each round table, but no list of speakers will be prepared in advance.

C. Times and locations

7. The ministerial round tables will be held at Headquarters, in New York, on Monday, 11 March 2019, from 3 to 6 p.m., at the times set out in the table below.

Round table	*Time*	*Location*
Good practices in the provision of social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure, including for recognizing and valuing unpaid care and domestic work	3–4.30 p.m.	Conference room 4
Good practices and policies for the design, and the provision and implementation of social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure, including	3–4.30 p.m.	Conference room 1

Round table	*Time*	*Location*
for the promotion of women's representation in various sectors and all levels		
Good practices in the provision of social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure, including for recognizing and valuing unpaid care and domestic work	4.30–6 p.m.	Conference room 4
Good practices and policies for the design, and the provision and implementation of social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure, including for the promotion of women's representation in various sectors and all levels	4.30–6 p.m.	Conference room 1

8. The Chairs of the ministerial round tables will guide the discussion with a view to promoting interaction. Interventions are not to exceed three minutes, and emphasis will be placed on dialogue. Ministers will be encouraged to ask questions and comment on interventions made during the dialogue. Time permitting, ministers may be given the opportunity to make more than one intervention. Written statements are strongly discouraged.

D. Outcome

9. The outcomes of the ministerial round tables will be in the form of Chairs' summaries, prepared in consultation with the regional groups through the members of the Bureau.

III. Items for discussion in the ministerial round tables

A. Background

10. The discussion of the priority theme "Social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls" will provide the Commission with an opportunity to consider the topic in terms of how gender-responsive investments across the three areas can help to achieve the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by freeing up women's and girls' time, supporting their mobility, enhancing their access to economic opportunities and strengthening their resilience to shocks.

11. There has been significant progress in terms of women's and girls' access to social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure. However, significant gender gaps remain, and, in many contexts, progress has been uneven. Women and girls who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination are particularly affected by exclusion and marginalization. Across countries, those from poor households, rural areas and specific ethnic groups experience clustered deprivation, from reduced access to education, health care and decent housing, to clean energy, water and sanitation. Closing those gaps and ensuring that no one is left behind will require a significant injection of resources alongside targeted measures to expand access, improve quality and strengthen policy coherence among the three areas, including through greater coordination across sectors and levels of government and with for-profit and not-for-profit providers.

12. During the round tables, ministers will be invited to consider the questions in the discussion guide below and to focus on what needs to be done to accelerate the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to realize the human rights and empowerment of all women and girls. Ministers are encouraged to identify effective policies, what needs to be done and who will take the required steps and measures. Ministers are also encouraged to use the discussion guide and to consult the report of the Secretary-General on the priority theme of the sixty-third session (E/CN.6/2019/3).

B. Discussion guide

Good practices in the provision of social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure, including for recognizing and valuing unpaid care and domestic work

13. Sustainable Development Goal 5, target 5.4, explicitly acknowledges the importance of the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies in recognizing and valuing unpaid care and domestic work. Across the globe, such work is disproportionately carried out by women and girls. Social protection systems have slowly started to take unpaid care and domestic work into account. A growing number of contributory pension schemes provide care credits that can help to narrow gender pension gaps by compensating for periods taken out of employment to care for children or other dependents. Several public works programmes have incorporated the provision of on-site creches and reduced working hours to enable the participation of workers with care responsibilities. However, more systematic efforts are needed to recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work in and through social protection systems.

14. Strengthening the linkages between social protection systems, public services and sustainable infrastructure is critical to ensuring that the recognition of unpaid care and domestic work sustains the empowerment of women and girls in the long-term. In many developing countries, conditional cash transfers have been effective in increasing demand for public services, such as maternal health care and schooling for girls. However, service quality remains a challenge and more and better investments in services are required to address that challenge. In the face of health staff shortages, women and girls end up waiting long hours to be attended to, losing time that could otherwise be spent on productive activities, education, leisure or rest. In rural areas, the lack of appropriate transport infrastructure means that women and girls must walk long hours to reach health and educational facilities. Greater investments in childcare services and long-term care services for care-dependent older persons and/or the chronically ill are also critical to supporting the provision of care across generations without undermining women's economic empowerment.

15. The widespread lack of infrastructure related to clean energy, water and sanitation in developing countries, in particular in rural and remote areas and in urban slums, increases the drudgery of unpaid care and domestic work and exacts a high toll on women's and girls' time, health and well-being. In 2015, 2.1 billion people lacked access to safely managed drinking water. Women and girls are responsible for water collection in 80 per cent of households without access to water on premises. Women and girls also account for 6 of every 10 premature deaths that are attributed to household air pollution, owing to the use of unclean fuels and inefficient technologies in cooking and heating. Investments across those areas can generate time savings, health benefits and productivity gains in women's paid and unpaid work.

16. Ministers are invited to consider the following questions to help to focus the dialogue:

(a) What steps are Governments taking to advance towards the coordinated and integrated provision of social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls?

(b) What are examples of national social protection systems that have recognized and valued unpaid care and domestic work?

(c) What investments are Governments making to strengthen public care services, including early childhood education and care, long-term care for older persons and/or care for the chronically ill?

(d) What measures are Governments taking to mainstream gender perspectives into the design and implementation of essential infrastructure, such as clean energy, sustainable transport and safe water and sanitation?

Good practices and policies for the design, and the provision and implementation of social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure, including for the promotion of women's representation in various sectors and all levels

17. Investments in social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure provide an important opportunity for job creation. Public works programmes are an important component of social protection systems in many countries, and some countries have put in place quotas to promote women's representation in those programmes. Public services and infrastructure are important sources of employment for both women and men. Globally, women constitute 60 per cent of the workforce in the education sector and nearly 70 per cent in the health-care and social work sectors. As with other sectors, women are underrepresented in leadership and decision-making positions, but over-represented in front-line service delivery, in professions such as nursing, teaching and midwifery, where they often face low wages and poor working conditions, lack of voice and exposure to violence and harassment.

18. Across sectors, women remain underrepresented in infrastructure sectors, such as energy, transport, water and sanitation, in particular at the decision-making level. According to estimates of the World Economic Forum, women occupied only 11 per cent of senior positions in the energy and information and communications technology sectors in 2016. Even in the renewable energy sector, where employment opportunities for women are considered to be better than in the energy sector overall, estimates suggest that women hold only 20–24 per cent of renewable energy jobs. While women have made important inroads into science, technology, engineering and mathematics degree programmes, they continue to be a minority among graduates and continue to face social and institutional barriers to employment in "non-traditional" sectors. Affirmative action policies, mentoring and support for women's school-to-work transitions are among the options that countries have pursued to promote women's representation in male-dominated fields.

19. Ministers are invited to consider the following questions to help focus the dialogue:

(a) What measures have achieved proven results in ensuring women's equal access to employment opportunities in the context of social protection systems, including public works programmes and active labour market policies?

(b) What steps have Governments taken to ensure adequate wages and working conditions, including opportunities for career advancement, for women who work in front-line public services, such as education and health, child and elder care?

(c) What are examples of effective national laws and policies that have increased women's representation in infrastructure sectors, such as energy, transport, water and sanitation?